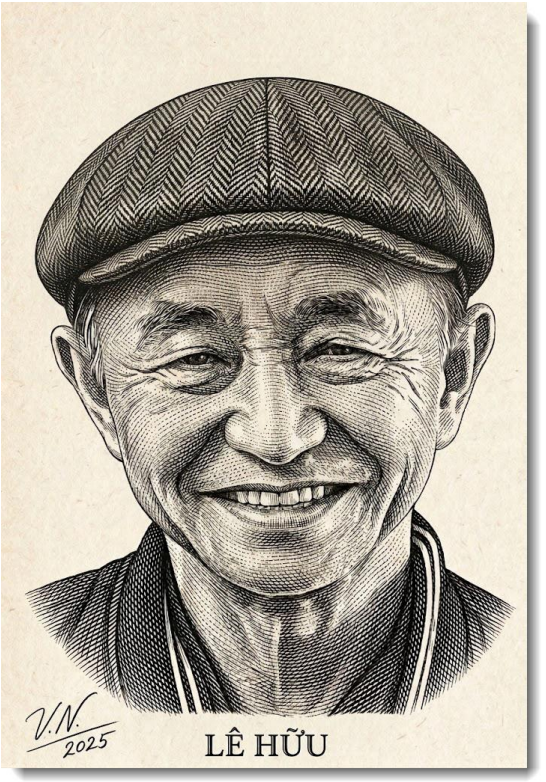
LÊ HỮU

Green Seasons in the Rainy City

V.N.



There are writers whose words make you stop because a sentence cuts as sharply as a knife. There are others who make you slow down

because of the sadness beneath their words. And then there are those who seem to do nothing dramatic at all: they simply tell a story, make a little joke, mention an old song, a rain shower, a painting, a friend who has gone away…

Yet when you finish reading, you find yourself sitting quietly for a moment, as though someone has just called your name from a very distant place.

I think Lê Hữu belongs to that last group.

I have enjoyed his writing for many years. If I had to find a single phrase to describe his particular literary gift, I would borrow a reminder I have often given myself: “Light, but never superficial.”

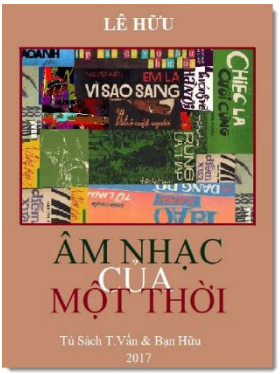
The “lightness” of Lê Hữu’s writing begins with the way he tells a story. He has no interest in showing off his literary skills or dressing an ordinary story in fancy literary clothes. His characters speak the way real people speak. Sometimes there is a little English mixed in, a little of the colloquial language of Vietnamese immigrants, a touch of mischief, a touch of humor. But beneath that casual surface, another layer of life is usually unfolding quietly underneath.

Read closely, and you begin to notice it: the lightness often hides a surprisingly deep sadness.

Perhaps that is why I keep coming back to Lê Hữu.

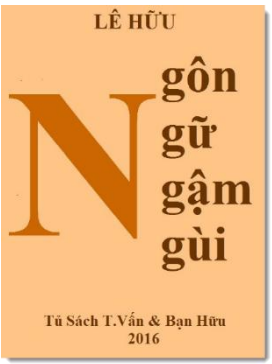
... A Writer Between Many Worlds of Memory

Lê Hữu has written in several genres, from short stories and essays to literary criticism and reflections on music and the Vietnamese language. His three published books trace that journey rather well.



Music of an Era, published in 2011, is a valuable look at the musical heritage of South Vietnam. But it is about much more than songs and singers. To Lê Hữu, music is memory. It is part of ordinary life. It belongs to a time that has passed but has never completely disappeared.

Some cultural treasures do not need anyone to bestow a title or an honor upon them. They survive simply because people carry them in their hearts. Old songs continue to be heard, sung, and remembered by generation after generation, both in Vietnam and abroad. And Lê Hữu writes about them not only with the mind of a researcher, but also with the heart of someone who loves literature, poetry, and music.



Then came *The Language of Sorrow*, published in 2016. This time he turned his attention to the Vietnamese language before and after 1975. The title itself says more

than an ordinary introduction ever could.

The Language of Sorrow sounds almost like a line of poetry. But behind it lies a deep concern about words, about the changes that have taken place in Vietnamese, and about what a language carries with it when an entire community is uprooted and begins a new life somewhere else.

Then, in 2022, came *Gifts in the Middle of the Pandemic*, which brought Lê Hữu back to storytelling. The stories are close to everyday life, adapted from news reports in the American press.

Taken together, the three books reveal a writer who seems to live between worlds: between literature and music, scholarship and storytelling, Vietnam and America, past and present.

Perhaps that is why, in his writing, memory rarely stays where it belongs.

It keeps trying to come back.

A song comes back. A painting comes back. A book comes back. A friend comes back.

And sometimes, even spring comes back.

… "The Cherry Blossoms Are in Full Bloom": Some People See in a Different Way

Of the four stories I read in *Seattle, Green Forever*, "The Cherry Blossoms Are in Full Bloom" is probably the lightest in form, yet one of the most subtle in its ideas.

The story begins at Green Lake Park. Mac, an elderly blind man, is sitting on a park bench. Dan, a young man, comes and sits beside him. Mac asks Dan what he can see.

Dan begins to "paint" the world around them with words. He describes the sky, the trees, the birds, the people walking by, children, young lovers, a boy in a wheelchair, a young woman sunbathing …

What is interesting is that Mac cannot see with his eyes, yet he seems to possess a remarkably complete world.

He hears the birds.

He hears people.

He hears the bench.

He hears breathing.

And most important of all, he sees with memory.

When Dan tells him that the cherry blossoms are blooming, Mac remembers "Cherry Blossom Season," the song by Thanh Sơn[1]. He says something very

[1] Thanh Sơn (1938–2012) A Vietnamese composer. His songs for students were popular in the 1960's, then he switched to folks songs in the 1990's.

beautiful: he loves cherry blossoms, but more precisely, he loves “the color of the flowers loved by the person I love.”

That is something we all understand. When we love someone, we often come to love the things that person loves.

It is a simple idea, but one with a long reach.

We love a person, and through that person we come to love a certain color of flowers, a song, a street, a city. Then, when that person is no longer with us, those ordinary things can suddenly seem to have a soul of their own.

But the real charm of the story lies in its ending.

Throughout the conversation, we assume that Dan is the young man with sight, describing the world to a blind man.

Then Dan gets up.

He reaches beneath the bench and pulls out a white cane.

And suddenly we understand: Dan is blind, too.

So throughout that conversation, who was seeing for whom?

Perhaps they were seeing for each other.

Mac reminds Dan that life can still be beautiful even after part of the light has been lost. Dan gives Mac another way of seeing the world—through imagination.

Then the young woman sitting behind them, who at first saw no cherry blossoms at all, finally says to Mac:

“The cherry blossoms are in full bloom!”

The flowers may not be real. But kindness is real.

And sometimes, in life, something that isn't true can create a very real happiness.

That, to me, is where Lê Hữu's gift lies. He is light, but never superficial.

...“Looking at a Painting, Remembering a Person”

If “The Cherry Blossoms Are in Full Bloom” is about the ability to see beauty through another sense, “Looking at a Painting, Remembering a Person” touches something especially familiar to Vietnamese immigrants: *seeing an object and suddenly remembering someone*.

At first, the painting itself seems ordinary enough. A city in the rain. People walking beneath umbrellas. Gray patches of color. A woman in red, holding a red umbrella, leaning against the man beside her.

The painting has become so familiar that even the writer admits he sometimes barely notices it anymore.

Then Bùi Bích Hà notices something that everyone else has overlooked: a woman carrying a blue umbrella,

walking in the opposite direction.

Walking against the flow. A tiny detail.

But to Hà, it reveals an entire personality: *I don't have to be like everyone else. I'll walk my own way. I'll love what I love, no matter what anyone thinks*.

This is one of my favorite moments in the story.

Anyone can look at a painting with his eyes. A writer looks at it through the character of a human being.

Then Hà says the painting reminds her of the rain in Huế. Seattle and Huế are separated by half a world. But memory has its own geography. Sometimes two distant places are separated by nothing more than the sound of rain.

Lê Hữu writes this passage with an easy charm. He says he loves rain—but not Seattle rain. He likes the rain of Đà Lạt. A fine mist. A soft drizzle. A gentle rain—just enough, he says, "just enough to dampen the hair of lovers."

That is pure Lê Hữu. No grand gesture. No attempt to impress. And yet poetry simply slips in.

Then comes something that seems small but turns out not to be small at all. The painting had been intended as a gift for Hà, but when she left Seattle, both of them forgot to take it with them.

Then the pandemic arrived.

The promised "next time" never came.

The painting remained in the writer's house, but somehow, from that moment on, it belonged to Hà.

That is when a painting becomes a keepsake.

It is no longer simply something hanging on a wall.

It becomes *an absent person*.

You look at the painting and remember the person.

After Hà passed away, the author's half-joking, half-serious remark—"Having the painting is like having Hà"—suddenly became true.

Sometimes literature does not have to be beautiful.

It only has to be true.

True to a memory. True to someone who is gone. True to the empty space that person has left behind.

That is why, for me, "Looking at a Painting, Remembering a Person" the most moving of the four stories.

…"A Christmas Letter from Heaven": A Very Kind Lie

The third story takes Lê Hữu somewhere else entirely.

A red balloon drifts into the garden of Ann and Dick in Bellevue. Tied to the balloon is a letter from a boy named Ben to his father, who has died. On the letter are the words: "*To my Dad in Heaven*."

The story sounds like a modern fairy tale. But what makes it especially interesting is that the story has its roots in real life. The author notes that the story was adapted from an ABC News report from 2016.

Ben misses his father.

So he writes him a letter in Heaven.

His father cannot answer, of course but the letter falls into the hands of another family, and from that accident a circle of love begins to form.

Ann and Dick had lost a son of their own. They decide to write to Ben as his father might have written and to buy the gifts the boy had requested.

Ann says something deeply touching: she asks for “the joy of it,” so that everyone might share a little happiness at Christmas.

Dick says the balloon had “landed in his heart.”

I think the word *gift* has several layers of meaning in this story. The gift is not merely a pair of Nike shoes, a Rubik's Cube, or a Lego set.

The greatest gift is *faith*.

The faith of a child who believes that his father is still somewhere. The love of a mother. The happiness of a couple who, though strangers to the child, are given the chance to do something kind for him. And finally, the comfort that human beings can give one another.

Dick writes to Ben as though the boy's father in Heaven were answering him. Ben receives the letter and the gifts. He sleeps peacefully and dreams that his father is sitting beside him.

Some readers might say this is a story designed to tug too hard at the heartstrings.

They would be right. But sometimes what is easy to feel is not easy to write. Making a reader cry may not be terribly difficult. Making a reader cry without making him feel manipulated into crying—that is much harder.

Lê Hữu chooses the simplest path: He tells a story.

No sermon. No long philosophical explanation. No attempt to prove that he is showing us the goodness of humanity. He simply lets a red balloon travel from Tacoma to Bellevue.

A distance of nearly forty miles but the important journey is not the distance between two cities. It is the

distance between two hearts. It has traveled from one heart to another.

And that is the flight that matters most.

…"Faded Spring": A Love Story with Age, a Past, and Things Left Unsaid

If the first three stories are largely about kindness and memory, "Faded Spring" has a darker shade. It is about love, age, war, imprisonment, the fate of Vietnamese refugees, and the years that history took away.

The story begins in a Seattle library.

Vĩnh meets Nga when she comes looking for Vietnamese textbooks for children. It is an ordinary encounter, but their conversation quickly takes on a playful, flirtatious tone.

Vĩnh deliberately plays with the accent mark in his name: "Vĩnh viễn, vĩnh hằng, vĩnh cửu, vĩnh biệt tình em." Forever, eternal, everlasting—farewell to my love.

The dialogue between Vĩnh and Nga is often genuinely funny. Nga is young, quick, straightforward, and a little mischievous. Vĩnh is older, talkative, and fond of teasing. He wants to feel young again, even though he knows he is standing on the far side of an age gap that will not be easy to cross.

But beneath those jokes is pain.

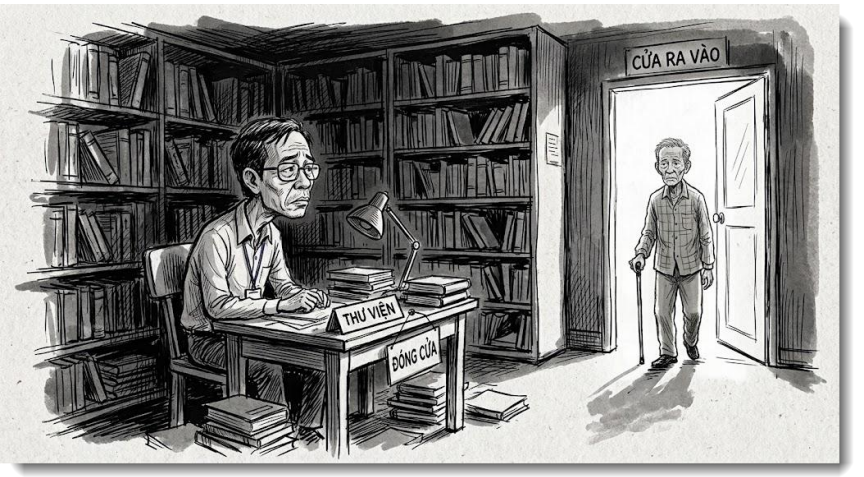
Vĩnh has spent years in prison after 1975. At one point he makes a remark that is both funny and heartbreaking. Those years, he says, were not really his life. They belonged to "someone else." Therefore, in all fairness, those years *should be deducted from his age.*

This is one of the memorable lines in the story because it reminds us that chronological age and lived life are not always the same thing.

A person may be seventy years old on paper, yet there may be years that he never truly lived. A prisoner may walk out of a cell, but part of his youth remains behind the bars.

Vĩnh wants to fall in love again, but he is afraid. Afraid of his age. Afraid of the distance. Afraid of rejection.

And perhaps most of all, afraid of losing the little happiness he has managed to find.



Near the end of the story, Nga does not come to the

library.

Vĩnh sits and waits.

In the darkness, he remembers every small detail about her: her crooked tooth, her eyes, her laughter, the armchair, the computer desk…

Then a Vietnamese man appears.

Toàn.

An old friend from the A30 prison camp in Tuy Hòa.

Vĩnh recognizes Toàn, but he can barely recognize the old friend he once knew. Toàn has grown old. He is thin, his hair is gray, and his face is covered with wrinkles—the marks left by years in prison.

And looking at Toàn, Vĩnh suddenly realizes that he, too, has grown old far more quickly than he had ever wanted to admit.

It is a rather bitter ending.

Throughout the story, Vĩnh tries to see himself as a young man. Nga helps him play at being young again. Their conversations about love, old songs, and flirtation seem to pull him back toward a youth he had lost.

But Toàn appears like a mirror. And in that mirror, Vĩnh sees *time*.

That is why the title *Faded Spring* is so appropriate.

Spring is not only a season of nature. Spring is also

youth. And some springs do not fade simply because nature says they must. Some springs are taken away by history.

...A Writer of Small Things

After reading all four stories, I realized that Lê Hữu has a very distinctive "technique," although I suspect he would never call it that.

He likes small things.

A white cane.

A cherry blossom.

A painting.

A red balloon.

A letter.

A book.

A crooked tooth.

A song.

In everyday life, such things may seem insignificant. But in Lê Hữu's stories, they become hooks on which memory hangs.

A painting hooks us to a friend who has died.

A song hooks us to a love affair.

A book hooks us to the past.

A balloon hooks us to a father in Heaven.

A flower hooks us to spring.

And from something small, he opens the door to something large.

That is the kind of writing I like because, in truth, life works much the same way.

We do not remember someone only because of the great things he or she did. Sometimes we remember a person because of the cup they used, the chair they sat in, something they once said, or a song they loved.

Then one day, those inanimate objects suddenly seem to possess a soul.

...Lê Hữu and Seattle

Perhaps it is no accident that these stories take place in Seattle.

In Lê Hữu's writing, Seattle is not merely a city. It is a state of mind.

A city with rain. With libraries. With Green Lake. With Vietnamese people passing through one another's lives.

Some newly arrived. Some who have been there for years. Some carrying the past with them. Some trying to forget it. And some who think they have forgotten, until a song begins to play and everything comes rushing back.

Lê Hữu's own life in the Vietnamese-American community is part of this landscape. He once helped administer the Văn Lang Vietnamese Language School in Southwest Seattle, where children were taught Vietnamese language and culture. He also helped establish the Senior Citizens Association, with many activities for older adults.

So he does not merely write about the community.

He is part of it.

Perhaps that is why the people in his stories rarely feel like strangers. They may be a blind old man at Green Lake, an American couple, a Vietnamese girl in a library, a former political prisoner, or a fellow artist and writer who has passed away.

But beneath their individual stories are things we all recognize: loneliness, love, memory, and the need to be understood by another human being.

…"Light, but Never Superficial"

I think this is where I feel closest to Lê Hữu.

I do not live in Seattle. But through the friends and fellow writers I know there, Seattle is no longer merely a name on a map. That rainy city has the faces of friends, and among those friends is Lê Hữu.

Literary friendship can be a strange thing.

Some people see each other every week and never

become close.

Others may be separated by a continent, a time zone, and years without meeting face to face. Yet all it takes is reading something the other person has written to know whether he is happy or sad.

That is one of the things I value about Lê Hữu.

He is not the kind of writer who makes you sit up straight and concentrate in order to read him.

He invites you to sit down. Perhaps beside a cup of coffee. Perhaps beneath a Seattle rain shower. Perhaps in a library. Perhaps under a cherry tree.

Then he tells you a story.

And when he finishes, he leaves you to think about it.

Perhaps that is one of the hardest things for a writer to learn when to stop.

A superficial writer tells you everything.

A heavy-handed writer explains everything.

A subtle writer leaves a little empty space.

Lê Hữu often leaves that space.

In “The Cherry Blossoms Are in Full Bloom,” whether the flowers are real or not no longer matters.

In “A Christmas Letter from Heaven,” Ben will one day understand that the letter did not really come from Heaven—but the love inside it was real.

In “Looking at a Painting, Remembering a Person,” the painting remains only a painting, but the person who is gone has become something more than a memory.

In “Faded Spring,” whether Nga comes back, whether Vĩnh ever tells her he loves her, may ultimately matter less than the fact that this older man has discovered, perhaps for the first time in years, that his heart can still beat faster for someone.

Those are beautiful spaces for the reader to enter.

...And There Is a Very Special Lê Hữu in Friendship

I suspect every writer has an “ideal reader” somewhere in the back of his mind.

For me, Lê Hữu occupies a different place.

He is a writer I read in order to learn. Not how to use elaborate words but how to say something deep in a gentle voice.

I once believed that good writing required beautiful sentences.

Later I learned something else: sometimes an ordinary sentence, placed in exactly the right spot, can be more beautiful than one that is deliberately polished to sound literary.

Whether he writes about music, the Vietnamese language, friends, Seattle, or loves that have passed, his voice has something unmistakably his own: romantic

without being sentimental; nostalgic without drowning in the past; funny without becoming bitter; sad without becoming melodramatic.

Perhaps that is the "light, but never superficial" quality I have always found in his writing.

And perhaps that is why, even though we have not had many chances to meet, our friendship has not been diminished by distance.

Literary friends do not necessarily need to see each other often.

Sometimes it is enough simply to keep reading one another. To remember one another. To send each other a piece of writing. A story. A simple greeting.

That can be enough.

...Seattle, Green Forever

The title *Seattle, Green Forever* sounds almost like a promise.

Seattle will change. The trees will grow old. The benches at Green Lake will be replaced. Stores will open and close. Libraries will have new faces. The Vietnamese children of one generation will grow as Americans of the next. The Vietnamese immigrants who once arrived in Seattle with a suitcase full of memories will, one by one, grow old.

Some will return to their homeland.

Some will go somewhere else.

Some will end up beneath a gravestone in a distant cemetery.

Some will survive only in a painting.

A song.

A book.

An old email.

A story.

But perhaps literature is what helps us resist that fading. It does not defeat time by keeping everything exactly as it was. Instead, it gives the things that have passed a new life.

Bùi Bích Hà remains in a painting.

A father remains in a letter from “Heaven.”

A spring remains in Vĩnh's memory.

A cherry blossom remains in Dan's story.

And Lê Hữu, through these quiet and gentle stories, is leaving behind traces of his own.

I think that is the most beautiful meaning of the word “*green*” in the title of the book. It is not the green of trees and grass. It is the green of memory. The green of friendship. The green of things that may seem old, yet still have the power to make the heart tremble.

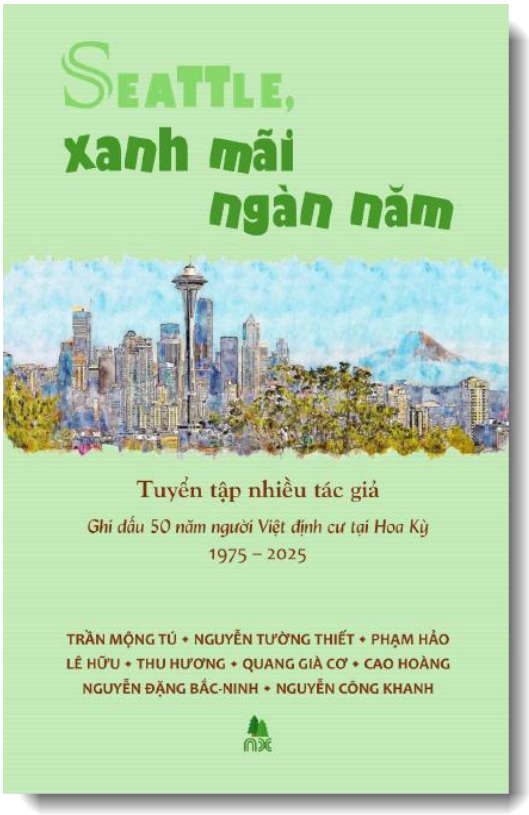
And perhaps, one day—long after we are gone—

someone happens to pick up *Seattle, Green Forever* and read the stories of a blind old man, a rainy painting, a red balloon, or a man sitting alone in a library waiting for someone…

Perhaps that reader will smile, and then remember someone. Just as we, reading Lê Hữu today, remember our friends in Seattle.

Seattle may rain. Spring may fade. People may go away. But the stories remain. And within those stories, the people remain seated beside us.

Perhaps that is how a city can stay *Green Forever*.


SEATTLE,
xanh mãi
ngàn năm
Tuyển tập nhiều tác giả
Ghi dấu 50 năm người Việt định cư tại Hoa Kỳ
1975 – 2025
TRẦN MỘNG TÚ • NGUYỄN TƯỜNG THIẾT • PHẠM HẢO
LÊ HỮU • THU HƯƠNG • QUANG GIÀ CƠ • CAO HOÀNG
NGUYỄN ĐẶNG BẮC-NINH • NGUYỄN CÔNG KHANH